DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 175 939 TM 009 678

AUTHOR Lerner, Barbara
TITLE Minimum Competence and Maximum Choice.
PUB DATE 11 Apr 79
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (63rd, San Francisco, California, April 8-12, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Failure; *Academic Standards; Basic Skills; Diagnostic Tests; *Educational Mobility; Educational Problems; Elementary Secondary Education; *Minimum Competency Testing; Performance Factors; *Remedial Instruction; Student Teacher Relationship; Teacher Role; *Testing Problems

ABSTRACT

The charge that minimum competency testing provides diagnosis without treatment is refuted. The movement has made no attempt to dictate course content or teaching methods; it leaves treatment decisions to individual teachers. Treatment can be defined only in relation to a problem. The problem, as minimum competency advocates implicitly define it, is that the community, especially teachers, has not supported the standards embodied in the tests. Teachers can support standards by devoting more time to teaching basic skills; evidence suggests that class time correlates strongly with basic skills mastery. Both advocates and critics of minimum competency testing are struggling with the problem of academic faulure. Research suggests that the client-therapist relationship is critical to success or failure in psychotherapy, not the method. It is hypothesized that the personal characteristics of teachers and students, the appropriateness of the match between them and the social milieu in which they operate is critical to basic skills mastery. Teachers and students should thus have the option to transfer from schools they did not or would not choose. (CP)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Barbara Lerner
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Presentation to the AERA Annual Meeting
April 11, 1979

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

MINIMUM COMPETENCE AND MAXIMUM CHOICE

Barbara Lerner

ED175939

In the 1950's the Supreme Court held that equal educational opportunity was the right of every American child. In the 1960's, the Court, applauded by a significant segment of America's intellectual elite, altered the shape of Constitutional government in an effort to guarantee that right to black children. Its efforts were doomed to failure, in large part because the Court and its allies never defined education as such in any clear, direct and measurable way. We defined integration instead, an indirect ideological measure that proved invalid; that is, largely irrelevant to educational achievement.[1] Definition is key here because a legal right which cannot be defined cannot be enforced and is no right at all, only rhetoric and illusion.

In the 1970's, a popular initiative developed: the minimum competence testing movement. Its essence is a clear, simple and direct definition of what universal mass education should provide--basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic--and an insistence on hard, objective data to measure success or failure in the acquisition of these fundamental intellectual tools by school children of all races, classes and backgrounds.

Negative responses from intellectuals in law, education and a wide variety of other fields to this definition and its implications are multiple and frequently expressed, often with great fervor. My own analysis of these criticisms, spelled out in a book in progress, indicates

TM009 678

that, with a single, key exception, all of them appear to be based upon assumptions that are at striking variance with reality. What emerges is a portrait of the people who make these peculiar assumptions, the people who reject them, and the relationship of both to the troubling cultural realities and tough social problems of contemporary America.

All of the major criticisms based upon false assumptions can, I think, be conveniently grouped under three main subheadings: 1) the minimum competence movement sets too external a standard; (2) it sets too low a standard; and 3) it sets too high a standard. I have tried to deal with each of these criticisms at some length in my book; I will not dwell on them here.

Instead, I want to try to present, as briefly as possible, the essence of my argument for the overriding importance of basic skills and then to spend the rest of my allotted time dealing with what I see as the one partially valid negative criticism of the movement: the argument that it provides diagnosis without treatment.

My focus will be on what we can do to give new hope and new help to public school children who fail to pass reasonable tests of minimum competence in reading, writing and arithmetic, year after discouraging year. I have chosen this focus out of my strong conviction that this is the single, most important public policy question confronting educators, psychologists and all other citizens who care about equality of opportunity and about competence in American life.

The essence of my argument is that youngsters, black or white, who lack basic skills have no real choice and no real chance in contemporary America because reading, writing, and arithmetic are the fundamental tools necessary to permit young people to choose the visions and vocations they will pursue.

Without these fundamental tools, it is folly to think that youngsters can learn enough about anything else in the modern world--philosophy, plumbing, physics, fire-fighting or what-have-you--to make a meaningful difference in their lives or our society. With them, they can learn whatever they choose to learn whenever they choose to learn it, with or without dependence on formal, academic instruction, and can do it whenever and wherever they please.

Reading, in particular, is not just one more subject in the Babel of contemporary electives. It is the key to the tower itself. Those who possess it may choose whether and where to enter; those who do not are consigned to remain outside its walls, seeking sustenance from those within. In the long run, their only real choice is between two profoundly distasteful alternatives: seeking their sustenance by begging or by bullying.

Intellectuals who fail to recognize these obvious facts often do so because they cling to an obsolete distinction between manual and non-manual vocations, viewing literacy as essential only for jobs in the latter category and not for those in the former. In reality, however,

the only significant remaining group of manual jobs which do not require literacy are unskilled jobs and these have been in short and declining supply for some time now. In today's economy, almost all skilled jobs, manual and nonmanual, require literacy. The requirement is not an arbitrary, externally imposed obstacle to the advancement of poor people or black people or any other group of people; it is simply an intrinsic part of any skilled work in a complex modern society.

From this point of view, intellectual condescension towards the millions of Americans, black and white, who initiated the great grass roots movement to institute minimum competence testing in the public schools is not only unwarranted, it is beside the point. Exaggerated and divisive racial rhetoric and hysterical attacks on tests and testers are equally irrelevant.

What matters is finding new and more effective answers to the charge that the minimum competence movement is a futile half-measure because it provides diagnosis without treatment. In its most frequently advanced form, the argument goes like this: all that the movement actually does is to mandate testing, and testing only tells us what is wrong; it does nothing to set things right. Stated in this extreme form, the criticism seems inaccurate and unjustified, but when the chaff of overstatement is stripped away, a troubling grain of truth remains. In struggling to strip away the chaff in order to come to grips with the very real but more manageable-looking problem that remains, it is helpful to take three reasonably clear facts into account.

Fact one is that tests always embody a standard--how else could they presume to tell us what is wrong and what is right? Fact two is that lack of standards and lack of consensus about standards can be and, in modern times, often is a problem in and of itself. Fact three is that treatment is an inherently protean concept which cannot be meaningfully delineated in the abstract. Treatment can only be defined and recognized as such in relation to the problem for which it is required. When the problem is defined in one way, something may be a treatment for it that would not be a treatment at all if the problem were defined in another way.

The problem, as minimum competence advocates implicitly define it, is that inadequate levels of community support for the imposition of standards resulted in inadequate efforts by children to meet them. If this definition has any validity at all, then the diagnosis-without treatment argument is at least partially obviated. The minimum competence movement, after all, did not merely impose tests; it marshalled massive community support for the educational standard it espouses and it mandated the use of tests embodying that standard. If lack of community consensus was part of the problem, then an emphatic restoration of consensus must be part of the treatment.

It may be a quite significant part. There is good reason to believe that it will help a considerable number of children who might otherwise fail. Evidence that sheer effort will help comes from recent studies showing that the one factor that correlates strongly with basic skill

mastery is the actual amount of class time spent working directly on those skills. Children who spend more time struggling to master basic skills outperform children who spend more time on other pursuits, regardless of the nature of those other pursuits. Theory may support the notion that a variety of other pursuits are equally efficacious; data do not.

The relationship between the testing and the teaching of basic skills is equally straightforward. Mandated testing of basic skills works to increase the amount of class time spent on the teaching of basic skills because teachers inevitably teach to the tests. Abstract condemnations of this reality seem pointless: whether it is a good or a bad thing depends upon what the tests aim to measure and how well they succeed in doing it. When the tests measure basic skills and do so with high degrees of reliability and validity, many teachers teach to them joyously, out of sincere conviction, based on their longstanding belief in the overriding importance of basic skills.

Such teachers are delighted and relieved that at long last, tests are focusing on what children really need to know, and community support and backing is finally available to them. It is, after all, no easier for teachers to impose standards without support or backing than it is for parents to do so. In many ways, it is harder. Students outnumber teachers in a classroom to an extent that they rarely or never do in relation to their parents at home, and a large unified peer group is a hard thing to buck, even when the group is composed solely of children.

It is one thing to take students' preferences into account to a reasonable extent; it is quite another to force teachers to compromise their standards and their integrity in order to compete in a degrading popularity contest. Teachers have no right to be cruel or abusive, but they have no responsibility to function as entertainers either. A humanitarianism that focuses only on children's rights, ignoring teachers' rights, can produce some very inhumane results. Teachers are also human and therefore vulnerable. They can be and have been badly bullied in recent years, sometimes through intense social pressures alone, but distressingly often with physical force and threats of force. For such teachers, the minimum competence movement provides some very partial but nonetheless useful protection, because it helps to clarify the fact that students cannot avoid standards by attacking teachers.

Of course, there are also teachers who disagree with the consensus on the fundamental importance of basic skills and resent having their students evaluated in these terms. Resentment based upon the notion that there are other, more important things for children to learn in school seems unjustified for at least two reasons, either of which appears sufficient to undercut their position.

First, children without basic skills are severely handicapped in their ability to learn anything else. Second, because there is no consensus about what other things are important and why, such judgments can only be subjective minority judgments. In view of that, it is hard to justify imposing any particular judgment on children

without also helping them master the skills necessary to obtain access to the whole range of conflicting judgments about what is important in contemporary society and why. It is especially hard to justify such an approach with poor children, black or white. The more isolated children are from contacts with people representing the diversity of life styles, vocations and visions in modern America, the more critical such access becomes.

From this perspective, arguments that a focus on basic skills undercuts local control seem misconceived at best, hypocritical at worst. The universally acknowledged virtue of local control is its efficacy in promoting freedom of choice by protecting diversity. When local control operates to deprive children of the skills that provide access to diversity, its raison d'etre is fatally undermined. By insisting that literacy is not a matter for local option, but everything else is, the minimum competence movement promotes access to diversity for all children without doing violence to community control or professional autonomy.

Arguments that the minimum competence movement destroys discretion with regard to substantive course content and/or teaching methods have no easily discernible basis in reality. Children can and have learned to read using written material dealing with an infinite variety of topics. For this purpose, textbooks on plumbing can serve as well as those on physics, and philosophy has no inherent superiority over pornography. The movement has made no attempt to dictate what children

read; its only concern is with whether they read and how well they do it. The same holds true for numeracy: a grasp of basic mathematical principles seems to emerge out of work with dice or sports scores as easily and well as out of a focus on apples and oranges or abstract integers. In terms of the standard set by the minimum competence movement, anything that works is acceptable.

The movement is equally neutral and nonintrusive with regard to teaching methods or techniques, as well it should be. Here, the fundamental issue is not local control but professional autonomy. Educational goal setting of various sorts may be a legitimate group activity under various conditions, but no group, local, state or national; public, private or professional, is justified in dictating how individual teachers must proceed to accomplish their goals. Dictation of that sort is incompatible with autonomy and a nonautonomous professional is a contradiction in terms.

Professionals are people who are paid to use their judgment in working out effective ways of accomplishing agreed upon aims. Tasks that can only be done in one way are not professional tasks at all. They may call for high levels of skill but degree of skill is not the characteristic which distinguishes professional tasks from nonprofessional ones. The difference is qualitative, not quantitative. Professional judgment is needed when there are a multiplicity of ways of doing something and no one method has proved consistently superior to any other method. That is precisely the situation with regard to teaching techniques.

Questions about teaching techniques have been extensively researched for many decades, but no clear answers have emerged. What happens, over and over again, is that an approach which works very well when used by some teachers in some settings turns out to be ineffective when used by other teachers in other settings. Educational researchers have been both conscientious and creative in the continuing search for meaningful generalizations about which techniques work best for which children and why but the situation remains unclear. All techniques work some of the time, none of them work all of the time, and no single approach produces consistently superior results with any definable group of children.

That being the case, it would seem practically inefficacious as well as politically objectionable for any group to try to impose its preferences regarding educational methodology on teachers. Every teacher should be free to experiment with a variety of methods in order to choose the ones that work best in each situation. Outside intervention seems constructive rather than destructive only insofar as it helps teachers to evaluate the success or lack of success produced by various methods in various situations. The minimum competence movement does precisely that, by providing a clear standard against which to judge success and failure and objective feedback on results through systematic testing programs.

Viewed in this perspective, there is more than a grain of truth in the notion that the minimum competence movement provides diagnosis without treatment, but that turns out to be a strength and not a weakness. It is a strength because treatment decisions are best left in the hands of

professional experts who are in a position to effectuate them: individual teachers with the freedom and flexibility to keep trying different approaches until they find the ones that work best in each situation.

The obvious and emphatic objection to this conclusion is that that is, in essence, what we have been doing all along, and it has not worked. Too many children fail to learn what they need to know and the consequences of their failure are too devastating for them and for society as a whole to merit continued toleration. Something more must be done.

One response is that something more has been done and the minimum competence movement has done it. No teacher can succeed in teaching children who are not motivated to learn, and motivation is not a magic elixir which teachers can singlehandedly extract from their techniques and somehow pour into children to make them expend the effort that every known method requires. Society as a whole must foster and maintain the requisite motivation through a clear and consistent emphasis on the importance of at least a few key tasks essential for its children's survival and ultimately, for its own. In pinpointing those key tasks and underlining their centrality in unmistakable terms, the minimum competence movement has done just that.

There is good reason to believe that that will be of some help to all children and of sufficient help for many. The problem is that there is equally good reason to believe that it will not, in and of itself, prove sufficient for all. Some children who have the capacity to perform adequately will still fail to do so. For them, there is a bitter element of truth in the charge that the minimum competence movement has thus far provided diagnosis but no adequate treatment.

It is not for want of trying. Many of the more thoughtful critics have zeroed in on this problem and most minimum competence advocates are keenly aware of it and have struggled to solve it. To date, the minimum competence movement has been primarily a state level phenomenon and typical state legislation in this area calls for remedial help for youngsters whose test scores indicate that they are not meeting the standards set and not making adequate progress towards meeting them. The best state laws require very early diagnosis and very prompt remedial help. These measures probably serve to reduce the numbers of unnecessary failures but they have not yet come close to eliminating them and that is not good enough in terms of the movement's own apparent aim.

The apparent aim of the minimum competence movement is to see to it that all normal children get an education adequate to the demands of the modern world, an education sufficient to give each child a realistic chance and some realistic choices in life. To accomplish that aim, something more is needed, but neither movement critics nor movement advocates have come up with any very potent-seeming new ideas about what to do.

Perhaps further research will yet provide the answers. It is at least conceivable that it will lead to the development of supertechniques which are maximally effective with all children or to a series of super-techniques, each of which is maximally effective with some specified group of children classified according to their learning styles and problems or their cultural backgrounds and personality types.

Perhaps, but then, again, perhaps not. It is also possible that teaching is not a matter of techniques at all, but a matter of the personal characteristics of teachers and their students and of the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the match between them and the social milieu in which they operate.

That appears to be the case with psychotherapists and patients, and the analogy may prove instructive. Therapists, too, adopt different techniques or orientations in their work, and these were once universally regarded as critically important. Freudian analysts were true believers in the efficacy of their techniques. So were other sorts of analysts and so were Rogerian therapists and followers of a multiplicity of other schools of therapy, each distinguished by a particular treatment methodology derived from a fairly elaborate theory of the development of personality and the causes of personality problems.

Research bore out none of their assumptions. It showed that what mattered was the quality of the relationships established in therapy and that this was a function of personal characteristics of therapists and their patients, qualities which were independent of therapeutic technique and which could not be predicted with great consistency on the basis of any a priore categorization of therapists or patients. The single, consistent finding was that good relationships mattered, and good matches facilitated good relationships.

Of course, there are differences in the nature of the tasks involved in teaching and in therapy, but these relatively subtle, internal differences seem less critical than a quite gross, external difference: typical therapists and typical patients are not forced together and kept together against their wills by being locked into particular institutions for long periods of time. Typical therapists and patients have some choice about the settings in which they work and some chance of moving from less compatible settings into more compatible ones.

Where this is not the case, as in old style, long term custodial mental hospitals and in prisons of any style, success rates for therapy, or for any other form of treatment, tend to be depressingly low, much lower than they are in voluntary treatment settings, using almost any standard of success. The intractability of the people who are confined in involuntary institutions may account for some of the difference here, but seems inadequate to account for all of it. Dropouts from voluntary outpatient therapy were once regarded as hopeless intractables too, until a couple of imaginative researchers took the trouble to do a careful follow-up study. They found that a high percentage of the patients who dropped out of treatment promptly reentered treatment at other clinics and were apparently deriving enough benefit from it to remain in it past the cut-off points which usually divide dropouts from remainers.

Some of my own previous research indicates that very seriously disturbed lower class black patients, many with multiple prior

hospitalizations, could and did profit significantly from voluntary outpatient therapy in a setting where both therapists and patients generally chose to work. On the basis of the usual prognostic characteristics, these patients seemed very similar to the populations of most involuntary mental hospitals, and their therapists did not seem consistently unique either. Experienced therapists at the clinic where the research was done may have been a somewhat distinctive group, but the inexperienced ones--psychology interns and social work field work students--seemed quite typical and, on the whole, in this milieu, they were about as successful with the same group of patients as the more experienced therapists.

What all this suggests is that choice of milieu may be an important factor in and of itself, with a significant impact on motivation and, as a result, on outcome. Obviously, there is no economically feasible way of giving all teachers and all students the same degree of choice that many therapists and patients have. Education in America is and should be a mass phenomenon in a way that psychotherapy is not and should not be. That, however, is no reason to despair.

The evidence from therapy research does not indicate that unlimited choice of settings is necessary or even necessarily helpful. Quite modest degrees of choice seem sufficient to extract quite major benefits, and it is not impossible or even terribly difficult to envision an economically feasible educational system which allows students and teachers a greater range of choices than is common under our current system.

Our current educational system often gives students a bewildering array of choices within settings while limiting the number of choices between settings to zero. Usually, only families who can and will pay for their children's education have much choice about which schools their children will attend. For the vast majority of others, genuine options are effectively foreclosed, either by the neighborhood school concept or by the dictates of the integration movement. Where families live is, of course, largely a matter of choice, but economic factors generally operate to severely limit the range of neighborhoods each family can choose from. Worse, because all public schools in neighborhoods within the economic grasp of a family may be indistinguishable from one another, the choice often reduces to one between Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee.

Free transfer plans adopted by many school systems in the wake of the Brown decision offered new hope to parents and children of both races by increasing the number of options available to them, but these hopes were quickly dashed. The Court routinely evaluated such plans only in terms of their immediate effects on the ratio of blacks to whites in each school, found them wanting in terms of the sort of total integration it felt was necessary, and struck them down. The desegregation plans the Court approved or imposed instead generally operated to decrease rather than increase the range of choices open to most students and to most teachers as well.

At first glance, teachers may seem to have much more choice than students, but on closer examination, much of the difference turns out to be illusory. Of course teachers, unlike students, are paid to be in the schools they are in, but most are as dependent on the availability of paying schools as their students are on the availability of free schools. Few primary or secondary school teachers are independently wealthy and, as long as most children attend government run public schools, most teachers have no choice about teaching in them.

In addition to being restricted to a single, often highly centralized system, most teachers also labor under severe restrictions on their freedom to choose between schools within the system. Relatively modest old constraints based largely on seniority rights have been supplanted in many areas by more stringent ones dictated by integration plans which make the exact racial balance of each school's faculty a matter of overriding importance.

The result is that many teachers and students are forced into schools they did not and would not choose and are locked in place with no hope of escape through ordinary channels. Under such conditions, it is not surprising that many schools develop a prison-like atmosphere. In such mileus, it seems as hard to form genuinely educational alliances as it is to form genuinely therapeutic ones. To assume that all students and teachers who fail to meet reasonable standards under these conditions are incapable of meeting them under any conditions seems unwarranted and unfair.

At the very least, it would seem preferable to put such assumptions to a fair test, by providing some reasonable alternatives for students who are failing in their current schools. Right now, the only realistic escape for most failing students who feel like prisoners of the public schools is to drop out of the educational system altogether. Disturbingly high percentages of students make that escape, first through truancy and then through formal departure as soon as they reach the age when that is permitted. Increasing numbers of their teachers also quit the system entirely, tired of being forced to function as jailers and then being excoriated for it by critics who deplore their behavior but offer them no real options.

Many of the remaining teachers are understandably discouraged. They have already done what they could to try to make even the worst public schools less prison-like by increasing the number of options within them. Faced with an extreme situation, many made an extreme response, increasing the number of choices within schools until even reading, writing and arithmetic became options, rather than requirements.

These moves were generally greeted with praise from activist members of the elite who tended to applaud them on ideological grounds. Unfortunately, they did little to change public school prisons into genuinely educational institutions, capable of turning out literate young men and women. For too many students and teachers, such changes served only to make their imprisonment appear more pointless, arbitrary and intolerable than it was before.

Restoration of reasonable standards and requirements for all school children along with careful monitoring of each child's progress through periodic testing should help to reclarify the point of compulsory schooling. Getting the point is a giant first step, but additional steps seem necessary for students and teachers convinced through bitter experience that in their present settings, they cannot make the grade. For them, a chance to choose a new and different setting may be the only way to rekindle adequate amounts of hope, motivation and effort.

Of course, there is not and cannot be any a priori proof, scientific or otherwise, that such a strategy will work, and one would have to be deluded or disingenuous to pretend that there is. All that can be offered is a hypothesis that makes logical sense, some suggestive empirical evidence supporting it, and a reasonably detailed and economically feasible plan for testing it out by creating a limited series of alternatives for students and teachers who badly need something new and currently have nothing.

In the preceding pages, an attempt has been made to develop and support such a hypothesis. In the book in progress, an attempt will be made to outline a way of testing that hypothesis by opening up access to new settings where failing students may choose and be chosen by teachers who want to help them try again, in places that both have chosen. Legislation has been enacted on worse bases, and has entailed higher costs. Extending education beyond high school for more and more people creates new students and new teachers, requiring substantial

new funds. New places for current primary and secondary school students and teachers would not.

The reality that literacy and numeracy are required for success in contemporary America cannot be changed without a drastic and possibly catastrophic restructuring of our society. The reality that those who fail to learn those essentials within the confines of a single public school system must pay for private school, go to college, or give up entirely, can be changed without much risk and with only a modest amount of restructuring.